

October 28, 2019

House Education Committee
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chair Hornberger and the Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

On behalf of the more than 500 members of the Michigan World Language Association, I am writing to oppose HB 4974. I respectfully request that this letter and the document appended to it be entered into the record of testimony of the hearing of October 29, 2019.

HB 4974 would equate foreign language with computer coding by allowing it to replace language credits in the Michigan Merit Curriculum. In a hearing last week, the committee was told by the bill's supporters that computer coding meets workplace needs and is a marketable skill. We don't dispute that. But computer coding is not a discipline – it's part of the larger field of computer science – and it is not the same as a world language.

A more reasonable solution would be to add a computer science requirement to the Merit Curriculum alongside world languages. Coding should not stand in for the unrelated and critical discipline of foreign language any more than it should stand in for English or Physical Education. Even Code.org, an organization dedicated to expanding access to computer science in schools, formally opposes legislation like this that would allow students to opt out of foreign language for coding¹. To quote Hadi Partovi, Code.org's CEO, "The only people who would suggest that computer science is akin to learning a foreign language have never coded before."

We do dispute the idea that seems to be at the core of this and similar bills that have would allow replacement of foreign language credits with coding or credits from other disciplines: that language skills are less important than computer science or other disciplines in the workplace. This is simply not true. There is a wealth of data showing employers need workers with language skills and that our educational systems are not keeping up with demand for them. A 2017 report² found that the demand for bilingual workers in the U.S. doubled between 2010 and 2015, and more recent data shows that this demand is ongoing. Earlier this year, nine out of 10 employers surveyed by Ipsos³ reported needing workers with foreign language skills. This need crosses all sectors of employment and all types of jobs, with some of the most intense demand for workers with foreign language skills in STEM fields like healthcare, and trades like construction. And the languages that these employers reported needing are the ones being taught in Michigan schools: Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Chinese top the list.

This survey indicated a strong need for workers with language proficiency domestically: nearly half, or 47%, of these employers reported that they need to fill jobs with speakers of other languages right here in the United States. Furthermore, a third of these 1200 U.S. companies said they can't find the bilingual workers they need, and a quarter had lost business as a result.

¹ [*Computer Science Is Not A Foreign Language*](#)

² [*Not Lost in Translation: The Growing Importance of Foreign Language Skills in the U.S. Job Market*](#)

³ [*Making Languages Our Business: Addressing Foreign Language Demand Among U.S. Employers*](#)

Although these were national surveys, this demand also exists in Michigan. An Indeed.com search for bilingual jobs in Michigan today found over 1900 listings in a variety of sectors, including health care, sales, customer service, finance, factory work, and more. In the region where I teach, companies regularly reach out to my department because they just can't find the French and Spanish speakers they need.

But language skills are not all that students gain when they study another language. They are also learning to communicate and interact in real time with real people, which are transferrable skills, and skills that are in the most demand by employers. Two separate surveys of U.S. employers last year⁴ found that communication skills topped the list of the most sought-after skills by employers, with other so-called "soft skills" related to human interaction rounding out their lists. Additionally, nearly three-quarters of employers found it difficult or very difficult to find employees that had the communication and soft skills they were looking for.

For many students, the primary benefit of taking the required language credits has to do with culture. They develop an awareness and appreciation of not only the differences that make every culture unique, but also the similarities that unite us all. In fact, many of our members report that as a result of the MMC graduation requirement, they had to change how they taught language, recognizing that they must reach all students and not just those who are college-bound, or who plan to take more language classes. For many, this change has been to make culture the starting point and the center that language learning revolves around. When I ask my French students why they continued to study a language after meeting graduation requirements, most often they say it was because they loved learning about culture as well as language. Students leave K-12 classrooms with an awareness that people who live where the language is spoken, including people right here in Michigan, have ways of existing in and understanding the world that don't always align with their own ways of existing in and understanding the world. Equally important is that in language classrooms, students begin to explore why these differences exist, so that they can better understand and interact with people in the interconnected world we already live in. This ability to think critically about their own and other cultures, and to understand the perspectives of people from other cultures, whether those are world cultures, workplace cultures, rural cultures, urban cultures, or any of the multitude of cultures that we find right here in Michigan, are also transferable and very important skills. Employers recognize this, too: in 2015, more than nine out of 10 surveyed said it was important to hire workers with intercultural skills.⁵

I would further emphasize that language study benefits all students, including those who will work in skilled trades or technical fields, those who will not pursue a four-year college degree, those who will continue to live in Michigan or elsewhere in the United States, and those with special needs, evidenced by decades of research showing improved overall academic achievement and enhanced cognitive abilities of those who study a second language⁶.

⁴ [NACE Job Outlook 2019; Morning Consult on behalf of Cengage](#)

⁵ [It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success](#)

⁶ [What Does the Research Show about the Benefits of Language Learning?](#)

In last week's hearing, the bill's sponsor described this bill as a small change in the Michigan Merit Curriculum, but with a big impact. But make no mistake, this would be no small change. It's a false choice that would have a big impact by limiting opportunities for our kids to develop skills and understanding they need more than ever in today's world and workplace. I respectfully ask that you reject HB 4974, and any others that would weaken the world language requirement in the Michigan Merit Curriculum.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JFoss', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Julie Foss
Public Affairs Liaison
Michigan World Language Association

The Michigan World Language Association opposes HB 4974 and any legislation that would allow students to opt out of world language study for computer coding or any other subject.

Coding is part of the discipline of Computer Science.

- Computer coding is part of the larger field of computer science, which is a critical 21st century discipline and deserves its own graduation requirement.
- Computer science is much more related to mathematics and science than to languages.
- Code.org, an organization dedicated to expanding access to computer science in schools, [formally opposes any legislation](#) that allows students to opt out of world language study for computer coding.
- According to Code.org CEO Hadi Partovi, “‘Computer *coding*’ isn’t what we should teach students. ‘Computer *science*’ is what we should teach. Just like in English class, we don’t just teach handwriting and grammar, we teach English literature and composition. Learning ‘coding’ is just one part of computer science. Learning algorithm design, computational thinking, how the internet works, data analysis, cybersecurity, these are equally important aspects of computer science, and *none of it, not even ‘the coding’ has anything to do with learning a foreign language. The only people who would suggest that computer science is akin to learning a foreign language have never coded before.*”

Computer languages are not human languages.

- Human languages are used to interact with other humans, to communicate shared experiences, make arguments, empathize with other people, and creatively express ideas. Computer languages are used to interact with machines.
- [Spanish has a vocabulary of 10,000 words. A typical computing language has a vocabulary of about 100 words.](#)

Michigan and U.S. employers need workers with *human* language skills.

- A search of [Indeed.com](#) for bilingual jobs in Michigan in October 2019 returned more than 1900 results.
- The demand for bilingual workers in the U.S. [doubled](#) between 2010 and 2015.
- In 2019, [nine out of 10](#) U.S. employers reported needing workers with foreign language skills, and 56% said their need will grow over the next five years.
- 47% of these employers’ language needs were [exclusively for jobs in the U.S.](#)
- One in three employers reported not being able to find the bilingual workers they need, and one in four reported losing business because of this [language skills gap](#).

Language study develops communication and “soft” skills in demand in the workplace.

- Communication is the [first](#) standard addressed in the Michigan World Language Standards and Benchmarks.
- Students in world language classrooms learn to communicate in all three modes: interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive.
- Communication is a transferrable skill.
- Communication and “soft” related to human interaction [are at our near the top of the list](#) of skills that [U.S. employers want in workers](#).

Language study promotes intercultural understanding, also in demand in the workplace.

- Culture is the [second](#) standard addressed in the Michigan World Language Standards and Benchmarks behind communication.
- In language classes, students learn to interact with people from other cultures in culturally appropriate ways.
- Students think critically about cultural similarities and differences, and the perspectives, or the “whys” that explain these similarities and differences.
- More than nine out of 10 U.S. employers surveyed in 2015 said [it was important to hire workers with these intercultural skills](#).

Language students perform better academically.

- Language learning is correlated with a wide variety of measures of [academic achievement](#), including SAT, ACT, and other standardized test scores, reading ability, the ability to hypothesize in science, higher academic performance in college, and more.

Bilingualism has cognitive and social benefits.

- Bilingualism is correlated with [greater general cognitive abilities](#), as well as specific abilities including memory, attention, problem-solving, spatial and visual abilities, and more.
- Speaking another language has been shown to [delay dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, and reduce cognitive losses after a stroke](#).
- Speaking another language has been associated with [greater levels of empathy](#), or the ability to understand others’ perspectives.